

THE PRINCESS PAYS

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BEING THE SECOND OF THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF
MR. STANLEY BROOKE, THE DELIBERATE DETECTIVE

WITH A DRAWING BY W. B. KING

AS full of human weaknesses as his fellows, notwithstanding his gifts of perception, the Hon. Stanley Brooke sat losing his money with cheerful pertinacity at one of the two roulette tables in the Sporting Club at Monte Carlo.

Arrived, after an hour or so of play, at the end of his nightly limit, he watched the disappearance of his last louis and, with a sigh, vacated his chair and seated himself on one of the divans which fringed the wall.

Here for some time he indulged in the occupation which, on the whole, he found more attractive even than the gambling. He watched the people as they went by—the women in their brilliant toilets and surfeit of jewels, looking as though the very air of the place had somehow fostered in them an insane rivalry in flamboyance, almost passionate, yet, in this particular corner of the world, not without its picturesque effect. By their side the men seemed more than ordinarily insignificant.

There were some whom he recognized, a few with whom he exchanged greetings, many of a class hard to place, difficult even to guess at. On the whole, considering the nature of their surroundings, it appeared to Brooke, as he watched them, that their faces showed very little sign of the emotions.

Large sums were being won or lost, but none of the crowd who passed seemed to carry any indication in their features as to whether they belonged to the fortunate or

unfortunate. There were little fragments of character which were, in their way, interesting.

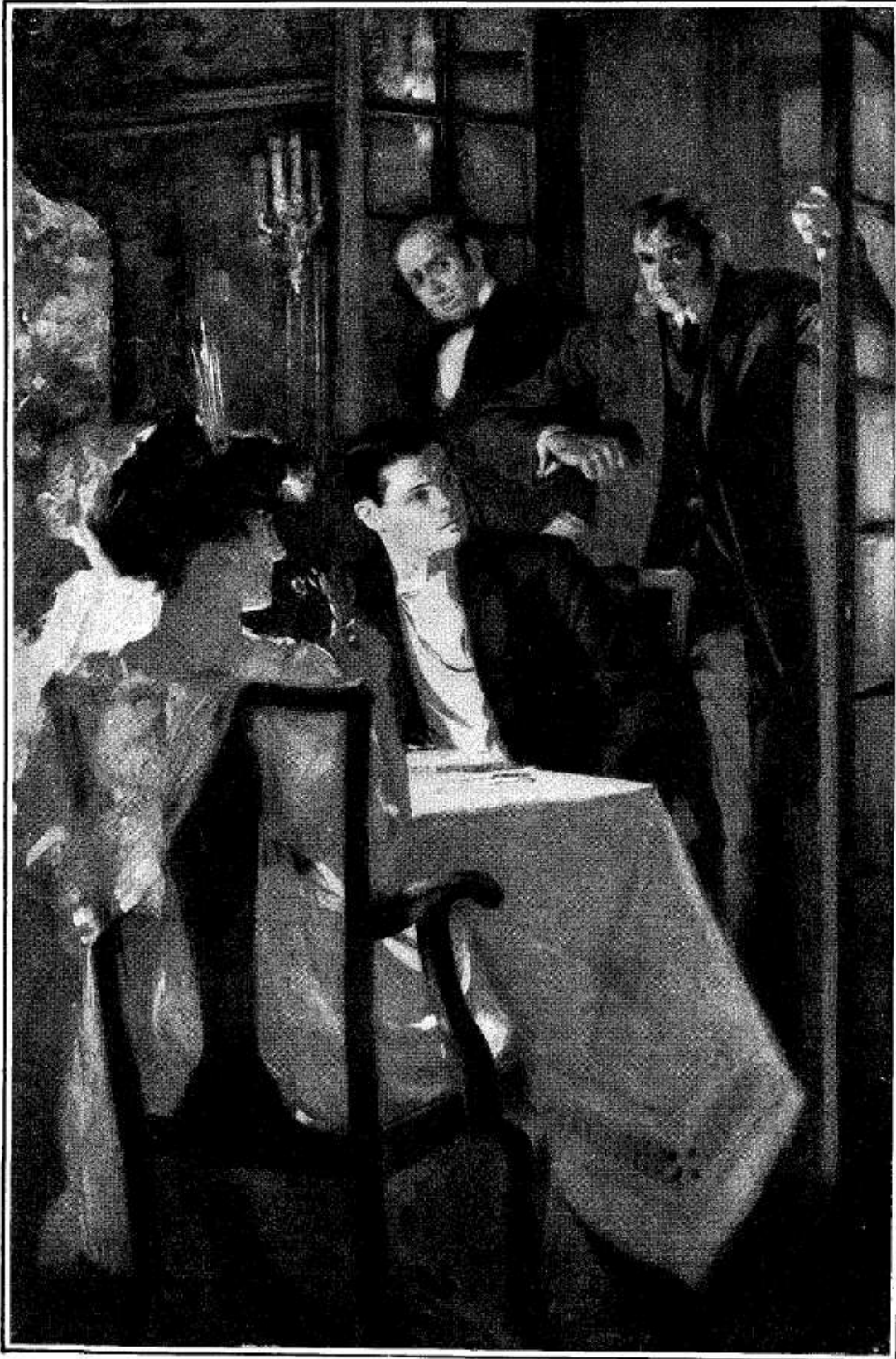
A well-known adventurer passed arm in arm with a rubber magnate of meteoric rise and uncivilized appearance. The heroine of a world-famous murder case, dressed in somber black, pale and emotionless, as she had seemed when she had waited for the news of her life or death, stood with a handful of mille notes in her hand, watching their dispersal without even curiosity.

A German prince passed, in eager attendance upon the lady who was reported to have enslaved his fancy for the moment, and who was walking round from the baccarat rooms to change her luck. Brooke leaned back among his cushions, mildly amused by it all. And then the first note of real drama!

A woman came slowly down the room, at whom most people turned their heads to glance. She was even more beautiful, more exquisitely dressed, more gorgeously bejeweled than those others. Her carriage was almost imperious. She looked around her with the insolent air of one accustomed to command.

Then, when within a few paces of Brooke, she paused, and he alone, perhaps, in the room, saw the change in her face, which was in itself an epitome of all the passions of life. She seemed suddenly to become rigid, her face chalklike, her eyes set and staring.

Brooke glanced across the room. Her



"GUSTAVE," SHE DIRECTED, "YOU HAD BETTER REMOVE THAT PERSON"

eyes were fixed upon the face of a middle-aged man who was looking over at the opposite table, craning his neck to watch the result of the turning wheel and quite unconscious of the woman's gaze. She stepped out of the throng and seated herself on the divan.

The little white ball had fallen into its place, the croupier's monotonous voice was heard announcing the number.

"*Vingt, noir, pair et passe!*"

A little buzz of voices arose from the crowd. The woman turned her head and glanced at Brooke.

"I had the honor of meeting you last night at the Duc de Mendosa's supper," he reminded her with a bow.

She inclined her head.

"I remember you perfectly," she admitted. "You are English, are you not, Mr. Brooke?"

"I am English, princess," he replied.

She looked at him for a moment appraisingly. It was a curious fact; but, in accordance with a recently developed instinct, directly he felt the significance of her look, his features seemed automatically to assume a somewhat fatuous immobility which, to one unacquainted with the quality of his mind, would readily stamp him a vacuous dawdler.

"Listen," she said. "I will tell you something. Come a little nearer to me, please."

He obeyed her at once. Her eyes traveled around the few people in their immediate vicinity. Her fingers played for a moment with the wonderful pearls which shimmered upon her white bosom.

"You know my history?" she continued. "Every one who comes to Monte Carlo knows it. What was it they told me about you?—that you were a novelist or an essayist, or that you were interested in people for some reason or other—I forget what. Listen."

Brooke remained silent. He did not specify the particular nature of his interest in his fellow creatures.

"Look across the room," she directed. "There is a man standing there watching the tables—a fairly good-looking, harmless, middle-aged Englishman."

Brooke nodded.

"I see the person you mean," he assented.

"His name is Geoffrey Hardways," she went on. "Well, I will tell you something

which may suggest a problem. Everything I possess and am in life I owe to that man."

He looked at her a little puzzled. Once more she played with her pearls.

"I am," she continued, "without a doubt the best-dressed woman in this room. I have a certain indefinite right to the title which I bear. There are no jewels in Monte Carlo to compare with mine. There are no men who would not come if I beckoned. This I tell you without conceit or false shame, and I repeat that everything I possess and everything I am I owe to that man."

She paused, as though expecting a question, but Brooke remained imperturbably silent. He had, however, the air of one who waits.

"You do not choose to commit yourself," she said quietly. "It is good. Therefore, I must put before you the problem which surely is not without its interest. What do you suppose are my feelings for him? Am I grateful? I have cause, have I not? Or do I wish that he had let me remain the very ill-treated and miserable governess of the lady in whose service I was when he found me?"

"Princess," Brooke replied, "you ask me a very hard question. Supremacy in any walk of life brings with it its own peculiar satisfaction."

"It is the answer," she declared, "of a diplomatist. Now give me the answer of Mr. Stanley Brooke."

"Princess," said he, "I think that if I were Geoffrey Hardways and you looked at me as you looked at him just now, I would leave Monte Carlo."

Very slightly her lips moved. It was scarcely a smile, yet it seemed in some way an indication of her satisfaction with his reply.

"Who knows," she murmured softly, "but that you are right?"

She rose to her feet and left him. Very slowly she continued her perambulation of the tables. Almost every moment some man paused to speak to her. She dismissed every one with a word. She was in one of her moods, a German financier murmured, who had been hoping to introduce a friend. She passed on until she stood at the other side of the tables. She came to a standstill immediately behind Geoffrey Hardways.

Brooke caught a glimpse of her face—white, and with a somber shadow upon it

—over his shoulder. Then he saw her fingers touch his arm, saw him turn around to receive a brilliant smile of welcome. They stood talking together. Finally they moved away.

Brooke, upon whom the incident had left a slightly unpleasant sensation, rose and made his way to the bar, where he found an easy chair and made himself comfortable with a whisky-and-soda and a cigarette. He had scarcely been there five minutes when the woman entered, with Hardways by her side. There were several empty places on the other side of the room, but after a moment's hesitation she led the way to where Brooke was sitting.

"Tired of the game already, my friend?" she asked Brooke. "Let me present an old friend of mine whom I have unexpectedly discovered here—Mr. Hardways, Mr. Brooke."

The two men shook hands. Hardways, although passable enough in appearance, was a little nervous and obviously not wholly in touch with his surroundings.

"All new to me, this, you know," he admitted a moment or two later, as they sat together. "Until I met—met the princess just now, I was feeling rather out of it. I've never been on the Riviera before in my life."

"You play, I suppose?"

"Don't understand the game. I play a little bridge at home."

"The Riviera and its life," the princess said calmly, "are all new to Mr. Hardways. He is disposed to be enthusiastic—why not? After all, there is little else like it, especially for those who love gambling. We must teach you to play roulette or *chemin de fer*, Mr. Hardways."

He laughed.

"I'd be afraid of losing," he confessed. "I am a poor man."

"So few people lose if they play intelligently," she murmured. "Several of my friends took over a thousand pounds each away last evening. It is so simple. Besides, you can always stop if the luck is against you. Isn't that so, Mr. Brooke?"

"I am not so sure," Brooke replied. "It rather depends upon one's strength of mind, doesn't it?"

Even as he spoke he found himself noticing the weak droop of the other man's lips, the somewhat covetous gleam in his eyes at the mention of money.

"If I were you," Brooke advised, "I

don't think that I should play, unless you first of all put a fixed limit upon what you can afford to lose. It seems to me to be the only way to gamble in comfort."

She laughed at him scornfully.

"You are a timid person, I fear, Mr. Brooke!" she exclaimed.

"If only I could afford it," Hardways muttered, gazing admiringly at his companion, "I'd like to have a plunge."

Brooke made his excuses a few minutes later and left the two together. Somehow the incident of meeting them continued to affect him in a slightly unpleasant manner. He felt a return of the same feeling when, the next evening, he came face to face suddenly with Hardways near one of the roulette tables. The latter greeted him vociferously.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Come and have a drink. Look here what I've won! Never saw such luck in my life! The princess stood behind me all the time—must have been my mascot, I think. I had three *en pleins* in six turns of the wheel."

Brooke walked with him to the bar. In a sense, he did so against his own inclinations, for the man failed to attract him in any way. Yet he felt an interest, the nature of which he could scarcely define. Hardways was talking all the time.

"By Jove!" he continued. "I really think I am in luck! Never been in the place before, you know. Never understood the game until the princess explained it. I only came to the club by accident. Chap I traveled with in the train advised me to."

"Where are you staying?" Brooke asked for the sake of making conversation.

"Up at one of those little hotels on the hill," Hardways replied, mentioning the name of a second-rate hostelry. "I can't run to the swagger places. I've got a wife and family to look after, and my profession—I'm an architect, you know—doesn't mean big things at any time. By Jove, what a life out here, though! How the people do enjoy themselves! Whisky-and-soda, eh?"

Brooke nodded, and they sat down together. The princess was standing talking to some men on the threshold of the baccarat room. Hardways's expression, as he watched her, was almost fatuous. He stroked his mustache complacently.

"Loveliest woman I ever saw in my life!" he exclaimed. "Do you know," he

went on confidentially, "she's an old pal of mine, the princess. I knew her when she was a little governess in Winchester and I was articled to a firm of architects there. She was a pretty little thing then, but I never expected her to blossom out like this. Jove! to think that I nearly married her!"

"In her way," Brooke remarked, "she has made a success of life."

The man laughed good-humoredly. He saw no second meaning in Brooke's words.

"Nothing like being at the top of the tree," he agreed. "She is that, and no mistake. They tell me all the men here are mad after her, but unless she takes a fancy to any one, she won't be seen talking to an ordinary person. Lucky for me I knew her in the old days!"

Brooke remained silent. The man went on talking in his simple, egotistical way of his life in the midland town where they lived, his wife's invitation to stay with an aunt at a hotel in Hyères, and his own visit to Monte Carlo, which he evidently looked upon as something exceedingly dashing.

"I was going back to-morrow," he announced, "but I think I shall hang on for a bit. I can afford it now, anyway. My Heavens, isn't she beautiful!"

The princess came slowly toward them. She was dressed in white chiffon, with less jewelry than usual save for that one rope of magnificent pearls. She smiled at the two men as she approached. Hardways hustled to find a chair for her.

"You must sit down, Violet," he begged. "Do you know how much I've won? Over a thousand francs—forty pounds, mind!"

She looked at him through half-closed eyes; a faint smile of amusement curved her lips. A thousand francs! There was sometimes a hat which she could buy for the sum—not often!

"But you are satisfied with too small things," she laughed. "I have brought thirty mille with me to-night and I am going to risk it presently. Come with me and I will show you how to play."

"Thirty mille!" he gasped.

The whole little world, as he knew it, seemed dwindling away.

"With your luck," she said, "you should be a large winner. You are content with too small things. One must learn to be ambitious—is it not so, Mr. Brooke?"

"That depends," Brooke replied. "My advice to every man who comes to Monte Carlo would be to gamble strictly according to his means. Personally, I think that a mille is a very nice little win for the evening. I think that I should button it up in my pocket and go home."

The contempt in her face was almost withering. She rose to her feet.

"You are both very small men," she declared. "I think that I will play *chemin de fer*. The grand duke is keeping a place for me."

"Come and play roulette," Hardways begged eagerly. "You promised to show me some new *coups*."

"If you have the courage," she replied. "Come, then."

Brooke passed in and out of the rooms once or twice that evening, and on each occasion he saw Hardways and the princess, the former always stooping a little over the table, the other at his elbow, sometimes advising, sometimes encouraging.

Hardways's face had lost the sleek, self-satisfied appearance of earlier in the evening. He was alternately pale and flushed. His eyes seemed to have drawn closer together. He appeared to be winning, so far as one could judge from the pile in front of him. The princess and he both held little cards and were evidently playing upon a system.

Brooke left them there to stroll on the Terrace with some friends and did not return. The next morning, however, about twelve o'clock, he met Hardways in the street. The man looked tired but triumphant. He was wearing a new Homburg hat and carrying a great bunch of roses in his hand.

"Just going to leave these at the Paris for the princess," he announced, greeting Brooke. "Let's have a drink first. I want to tell you about last night."

They seated themselves at one of the tables in front of the Café de Paris. The change in Hardways was momentous. His hands twitched nervously, his eyes had grown narrow. He had already lost some portion of his fresh color.

"Last night," he declared, leaning over toward Brooke and speaking in a low, eager tone, "I won eight thousand francs. Just think of it! I'm a poorish man, you know. Think of what it means. Eight thousand francs! It was dead easy, too. The princess has a system. I simply fol-

lowed. I've got a bit of a head for figures and the money rolled in. I am moving down to the Paris this afternoon."

"Glad you've been lucky," Brooke remarked; "but that sort of thing doesn't always go on, you know."

"Because people don't keep their heads," Hardways explained eagerly. "Now this system of mine, or rather the princess's, if you know when to leave off, is infallible. You win so much a day and you stop. The moment you begin to lose, you chuck it. See what I mean?"

Brooke smiled.

"I tell you frankly that I am no believer in systems," he confessed.

Hardways seemed almost angry.

"Anyway," he continued, a little defiantly, "I have won eight thousand francs, and I've made up my mind to win a hundred thousand before I go home. It makes all the difference to me. Just fancy, the whole of my work last year barely brought me in as much as I have in my pocket at the present moment!"

"Supposing you had lost it," Brooke asked, "wouldn't that have been inconvenient?"

Hardways finished his drink.

"I didn't lose," he said shortly, "and I'm not going to. No one need if they know how to play. I am just going to drop in at the Casino for half an hour."

He got up and walked away. Brooke strolled up as far as Ciro's to order a table for luncheon and back again toward the Terrace. He passed Hardways coming out of the Casino. The man's air of satisfaction was almost fatuous.

"A thousand francs," he remarked. "Quite easily, too. The system again."

"Wonderful!" Brooke murmured.

The obvious did not at once happen. Two evenings later Hardways walked into the bar about three o'clock in the morning with his hands in his pockets and a bright spot of color in his cheeks.

"I've done it!" he declared to Brooke. "I've won two hundred thousand francs! I've finished. I'm off back to Hyères tomorrow morning."

Brooke congratulated him, and at that moment the princess came slowly into the room. She was all in black, with a diamond collar around her neck and a diamond star upon her bosom. Hardways watched her come with a peculiar expression in his strained face.

"That's the most maddening woman!" he muttered. "No wonder—"

"Did I hear you say," she asked slowly, "that you were going?"

"I have won two hundred thousand francs," he replied triumphantly. "I'm off back with it."

She smiled, so slowly that the contempt of her lips was scarcely noticeable.

"You have no use for money, then, beyond two hundred thousand francs?" she murmured. "How right I was! Let us talk no more of the matter. Give me some wine, will you? I am tired."

She sank into a chair and Brooke, after a few moments, departed. When he came back Hardways was seated at the table, playing, and behind him stood the princess, her face white and set. An hour later their places were vacant. The princess passed Brooke and paused to whisper in his ear.

"It is the beginning of the end! He has lost half his winnings. He will stay—until he has recovered them."

The next day Brooke played golf above the clouds at La Turbie and dined with some friends at Cap Martin in the evening. He looked in at the Sporting Club only for an hour on the following afternoon, but there were no signs of either the princess or Hardways.

He found a note from her, however, at his hotel, inviting him to a supper-party that night at her rooms. He accepted, owing to some faint curiosity which he could not help feeling as to the fate of the man Hardways.

The company was small but select—a Russian grand duke, a couple of very well-known French actresses, an Englishman with whom Brooke was acquainted, and an American whose yacht was in the harbor.

There was no sign of Hardways. Brooke, who was sitting near his hostess, whispered an inquiry about him toward the close of the meal. Once more that peculiar smile he had never wholly understood played for a moment upon her lips.

"It is finished," she murmured. "It was difficult, for the man's luck at starting was prodigious. It is all over now, though."

Almost as she uttered the words some one pushed on one side the footman who was entering the room. Hardways himself stood there—a broken, dejected, yet threatening figure. He was still in morning dress. He looked as though he had

neither washed nor touched his hair for many hours. He glared at them all.

"Princess," he called out, "I want to speak to you at once."

She turned her head and looked at him. "Gustave," she directed, "you had better remove that person. He has not the *entrée* here."

"*Entrée* be damned!" Hardways shouted. "It's your fault I'm in this mess. The fellow you introduced to cash my checks has stripped me. I'm ruined! I tell you I'm not going back to face it. Lend me a few mille. Let me have one more try. If you don't, I'll shoot myself here."

He actually drew a pistol from his pocket. Not a soul moved.

"Will you lend me five mille?" he cried. "If any one tries to take this away from me I'll shoot him first. Answer!"

The princess's answer was a laugh. She had lowered her lorgnette and sat there, exquisite, maddening, laughing even with her eyes.

"But the man is mad!" she declared. "Mad with presumption, too, to cross my threshold. Shoot yourself by all means, dear M. Hardways. Others have done it before you."

The silence which followed her words seemed to have become possessed of a quality intensely, breathlessly dramatic. One felt that the man's finger had stiffened upon the trigger of his pistol. Suddenly Brooke rose to his feet and walked calmly across the room.

"Give me that," he said quietly.

Hardways hesitated, and that moment's hesitation weakened him. He was trembling now like a child. Brooke took the pistol from him and thrust it into his pocket.

"Not even a grain of pluck left!" the princess remarked scathingly. "Throw him into the street, Gustave. See that we are not disturbed again."

The servants, brave enough now, rushed him out. The princess turned round once more to the supper-table.

"A most impossible person," she declared. "I was unfortunate enough to have made his acquaintance when I was a girl, and he has made himself a nuisance to me. That, however, is ended now. Let us go into the salon and play."

Two days later Brooke met the princess in the hall at the Paris. She beckoned him to her.

"I want to speak to you," she said.

"I am at your service, princess," he replied.

She moved toward the lift and they mounted to the fourth floor. She consulted the number of the key which she was carrying and led him to a room at the end of the corridor. It was a small apartment with windows looking out upon the back. There was a heap of masculine clothing upon the bed. The room had apparently been vacated in a hurry. Upon the mantelpiece were some photographs.

"It is Mr. Hardways's room," she remarked.

Brooke nodded.

"What has become of him?"

"They do not know," she replied. "He does not appear to have returned here after he left my rooms two nights ago. You see, he has left his belongings. I inquired, and the manager permitted me to inspect his apartment."

Brooke looked grave.

"I suppose, then," he said hesitatingly, "he found the courage. Tell me what really happened to him."

"The tide turned," she answered slowly, "as I meant that it should. I stood over him and I watched him lose—lose all that he had won, all that he had with him. Then I introduced him to Felix, and Felix cashed his checks, one after the other, up to the amount that the man was worth."

"You mean that he is ruined?"

"Absolutely. To the last penny."

Brooke glanced at the photographs upon the mantelpiece. They were commonplace enough, except that the woman had a pleasant face. One was a family group in which Hardways himself was sitting in the garden with three children and his wife grouped around him. It was an undistinguished-looking picture. The princess looked at it through her lorgnette.

"I suppose," she said, "people find happiness in this sort of thing."

"Without a doubt they do, princess," Brooke agreed.

She remained silent. The picture seemed, in a way, to fascinate her.

"Do you know," she said presently, "that I was very nearly in that picture?"

"You were engaged to marry him?" Brooke ventured to ask.

"I was engaged to marry him," she admitted. "He threw me over. I was only a governess. His people were of the small

professional class. They considered that a marriage with me would have spoiled his chances. I wonder!"

She moved about restlessly for a minute or two. Brooke looked around the room once more. It was untidy, ordinary. The princess was gazing steadfastly at the photographs. She beckoned at last to Brooke.

"Come with me, please."

She led the way to her own apartments, a magnificent suite upon the first floor. From her desk she handed him a little packet.

"I have discovered," she remarked, "your reputation. You are supposed to be an amateur detective, are you not? You will please find this man Hardways, if he is alive, and give him this."

"If he is alive?" Brooke repeated doubtfully.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It is for you to discover," she said, only her voice trembled a little.

"Give me a letter to the chief of the police here," Brooke suggested. "One can learn nothing without influence. It is no use my searching for Hardways if indeed he has his place already in the little plot."

She wrote a few lines and gave them to him. Brooke took his leave.

On the following evening Brooke entered the smoking-room of the Paradise Hotel in Hyères from which Hardways had come. A familiar voice attracted his attention almost at once.

"Time of my life, my boy!" Hardways, who was the center of a little group sitting around the billiard-table, declared. "Met no end of old pals. Absolutely top-hole, every minute of it."

"Did you make a bit?" some one asked him.

"Came out about level," was the nonchalant reply. "A few mille up one day and down the next. Nothing to speak of. Lost all my luggage on the way back, though."

Brooke strolled a little farther into the room. The man Hardways looked at him, and the hand which held his cigar began to shake. Brooke greeted him with moderate affability.

"How are you? Saw you in the Sporting Club a few evenings ago, didn't I?"

"Yes, I was there," Hardways admitted. "I remember you quite well."

They drifted apart, but when a few mo-

ments later Brooke left the room, Hardways followed him.

"Can I have a word with you?" he begged nervously.

"Come outside," Brooke replied. "I have something to say to you, too."

They strolled along the terrace until they came to a seat behind some trees.

"Look here," Hardways said, "I hoped no one would turn up here just yet who was at Monte Carlo when I was. You know what happened to me?"

"I know," Brooke admitted.

"I meant to shoot myself. I wasn't game. It was just the thought of the wife and the kids, if it happened there. I wanted to make it easier for them. I have begun bathing down at the Plage. A chap went with me this morning. I am going alone to-morrow. I sha'n't come back. You see? It won't seem quite so bad."

The man was in earnest this time beyond a doubt. He was pale, and his face was twitching. Brooke produced the packet.

"I have come to Hyères to see you," he said. "The princess sent me. When you first appeared you reawakened in her some impulse of resentment. She did her best to make you lose at roulette. She did her best to break you."

"It is a judgment upon me!" the man muttered, looking steadily before him.

"The princess has changed her mind," Brooke told him, placing the packet in the man's hand. "There are your checks and your losings. You need not mind taking them. Her husband left her three millions."

The man seemed as though turned to stone.

"I can't take her money," he faltered. "I behaved like a cad years ago."

"She has forgiven you," Brooke said calmly. "She can afford, perhaps, to forgive. You must take the money for the sake of your family."

The man's fingers tightened over the packet. His head drooped. Brooke glanced at his watch and rose to his feet.

"Any message?" he asked.

Hardways tried to speak, but he found it difficult. He sat there gripping the packet. Every moment his face began to look more natural.

"Thank her," he said simply. "I'll take the money. After all, she married a prince."